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Choices in South Viet-Nam

Resignation of Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman removes an able and hard-working Far Eastern specialist from the State Department. This is too bad, because we have no surplus of brainpower in the field. Given the difficulties of his assignment, it is hardly necessary to search for some secret reason for Hilsman's preference for an academic career. It would be a bigger mystery if he didn't prefer a university post.

The issues in the Far East and in South Viet-Nam, in particular, are not matters of personal difference. The situation is one in which none of the options open to the United States is attractive.

The present support of the South Vietnamese effort to contain the Viet Cong can be continued; but it is not going well and does not seem likely to achieve its avowed objective of enabling the regime to exert sufficient military strength to stand on its own feet by the end of 1965.

The most readily available alternative is the acceleration of this effort with more United States equipment and personnel until sufficient force has been applied to contain the Viet Cong and liquidate the Communist forces; but this contemplates an American involvement that is not politically palatable on the eve of an election and that would have unpredictable consequences in escalating the effort of North Viet-Nam and of Communist China.

Another alternative would be to decline the battle on North Viet-Nam terms and take it up on terms where the advantage is with South Viet-Nam (through air strikes at Hanoi and other targets in North Viet-Nam). But this would risk similar action against Saigon and no one knows if the South Viet-Nam regime is strong enough to withstand this. Besides, it might invite massive Red Chinese intervention. It might even bring Red China and the Soviet Union together on at least the tactical situation and tend to get them to paper over ideological differences. South Viet-Nam could then escalate into a major war.

Events may force upon us another unpalatable alternative. If the present South Vietnamese government were overthrown by a neutralist coup, the United States would be left with no South Vietnamese government to "assist" with equipment and training personnel. Withdrawal decisions, in this case, would be made for us. Probably this would involve a fall back to Thailand and other Southeast Asia countries, but the prospects of containing communism in this part of the world certainly would be very poor.

Or, as another alternative, the United States might move out before being thrown out and voluntarily take up a new position elsewhere in Southeast Asia. This would have a terrible impact in the region and risk a slide of many other countries into Communist control.

The bare possibility of neutralizing Southeast Asia remains, but it is an alternative that could not be embraced with much hope unless it emerged from some wholly unexpected new accommodation with Red China on a broader basis. The melancholy precedent of Laos suggests the hazards of an unenforced neutrality in South Viet-Nam alone. It might save face but it wouldn't save South Viet-Nam—or anything else in Southeast Asia.

These are the dread alternative courses. It is no wonder that the task of arriving at a consensus in the Government is so great that able men are worn out in the process or leave the Government in sheer frustration.

The Government seems unwilling and unable to face a loss of position, prestige and pride that would come with withdrawal; but it seems equally unwilling to face the loss of lives and equipment that would be involved in enlarging the war. We seem condemned to drift until events make for us the decisions that we cannot or will not make for ourselves.